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Pounding and Grinding Stones in Prehistoric Malta

A new research project, led by Dr Robin Skeates of Durham University, UK and Suzannah DePasquale of the National Museum of Archaeology, Malta, is undertaking a biographical study of pounding and grinding stones in prehistoric Malta.

Despite having often been overlooked by archaeologists as an uninteresting category of prehistoric artefact, pounding and grinding stones now have a significant potential to shed new light on both resource processing and cultural processes in prehistory, especially by using a combination of established and innovative approaches to ground stone tools. These include typological and technological studies, characterisation and distribution studies, residue analyses, skeletal studies, and contextual studies.

The new research will extend these approaches to the rich archaeological dataset of the Maltese Islands, where a large number of pounding and grinding stones have been recovered from a range of residential and ceremonial sites, dated to between the fourth and first millennia BC. In the famous Temple Period, for example, there was a significant increase in the number and diversity of pounding and grinding stones used across a range of sites, including the ‘Hut of the Querns’ at the settlement site of Skorba, the Hal Saflieni burial complex, and the temple of Kordin III. This pattern ties in with other archaeological evidence which indicates that stone-ground cereals may have comprised an increasingly dominant staple element of the Maltese islanders’ diet at this time. However, what it means in terms of the socio-cultural processes of production and consumption has yet to be considered.

A central task of the research, then, will be to establish and interpret the long life-histories of these durable tools, from their procurement and manufacture, through their exchange, use, maintenance, retention, reuse, wear, breakage and discard in prehistory, to their archaeological discovery and collection over the last century. This work should help to shed new light on a series of key issues in Maltese and Central Mediterranean prehistoric archaeology, notably changes in: the design, production, use and cultural significance of essential tools; the strategic exploitation, processing and consumption of critical resources (especially staple foods); and the nature of local and long-distance procurement, production, trade and interaction.

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Figure caption

Ochre-stained ‘palette’ (left) and mortar fragment (right) from the Żebbuġ rock-cut tombs (c. 4000-3400 BC), on display in the National Museum of Archaeology, Malta.